

Report to: County Council

Date of Meeting: 18 October 2016

Scrutiny Chair/Officer: Councillor Huw Hilditch Roberts (Chair of the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group)/Steve Price (Democratic Services Manager)

Report Author: Rhian Evans (Scrutiny Co-ordinator)

Title: Strengthening and Improving Scrutiny in Denbighshire

1. What is the report about?

Progress to date with the implementation of the Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan, and the key findings of the recent scrutiny self-evaluation exercise.

2. What is the reason for making this report?

2.1 To update Council on progress to date with implementation of the Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan (Appendix 1) and the findings of the recent scrutiny self-evaluation exercise; and

2.2 to seek members' ideas for strengthening scrutiny in Denbighshire in readiness for the new Council term in May 2017.

3. What are the Recommendations?

That Council considers:

3.1 the progress to date with the implementation of the Scrutiny Improvement Plan;

3.2 the findings of the scrutiny self-evaluation exercise and the work underway to address weaknesses identified; and

3.3 suggests areas for Scrutiny in Denbighshire to focus and build upon in order to strengthen the function further during the remainder of this Council's term of office and to progress further during the term of office of the new Council.

4. Report details

4.1 Following the publication in May 2014 of the WAO's improvement study on scrutiny in local government in Wales *Good Scrutiny? Good Question!*¹, a Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan was agreed by the Scrutiny Chairs and Vice-Chairs Group (SCVCG) with a view to moving scrutiny forward in Denbighshire. The areas of improvement included in the action plan (Appendix 1) were identified during the course of the peer

¹ *Good Scrutiny? Good Question!*: <https://www.wao.gov.uk/publication/good-scrutiny-good-question-auditor-general-wales-improvement-study-scrutiny-local>

reviews undertaken as part of the WAO study and based on the conclusions of the national study.

- 4.2 Recommendation 7 of the national study stipulated that local authorities across Wales should “undertake regular self-evaluation of scrutiny utilising the ‘outcomes and characteristics of effective local government overview and scrutiny’...” For information a copy of the outcomes and characteristics for effective scrutiny have been attached at Appendix 2. In Denbighshire the SCVCG adopted the characteristics and ensured that a self-evaluation exercise based on the outcomes and characteristics was undertaken for the second consecutive year in 2015/16. The key themes emerging from this exercise were outlined during the presentation of the *Annual Report of the Scrutiny Committees 2015/16* to Council in May 2016. The self-evaluation process and the resulting findings are outlined below.

Scrutiny Self-Evaluation Exercise

- 4.3 In total 61 questionnaires were issued this year and a total of 30 members, officers and co-opted members returned completed questionnaires - a 49% return rate. This return rate far exceeded last year's response rate of 23% (15 completed questionnaires). Of the completed questionnaires:

- 15 were from Scrutiny Members
- 4 were from Cabinet Members
- 5 were from county councillors (non-Scrutiny or Cabinet members)
- 2 were from Co-opted Scrutiny Members; and
- 4 were from Corporate Executive Team (CET) members/Heads of Service

- 4.4 Elected members can view a breakdown of all responses received on the Modern.gov Library area by following the link below:

<http://mgintranet/ecCatDisplay.aspx?sch=doc&cat=13636&path=13634&LLL=0>

The main conclusions from analysing the responses were that:

- Scrutiny in Denbighshire does have a clear and valued role in the Council's governance arrangements;
- Scrutiny generally operates on a non-political basis and is councillor-led;
- Having Cabinet members present reports and being held to account by Scrutiny for their areas of responsibility works well; and
- On the whole a high level of mutual trust exists between Scrutiny and attendees at scrutiny meetings, be they Council attendees or representatives from partner organisations

- 4.5 The main areas identified for improvement under the self-evaluation exercise were:

- Provision of more scrutiny specific skills training events/material;
- The need to improve members' attendance at some scrutiny meetings;
- communication with the public and actively encouraging residents to engage with scrutiny on matters of concern or interest;
- exploring the potential to webcast some scrutiny committee meetings with a view to enhancing public engagement

- 4.6 Other suggested areas for improvement put forward by respondents included:
- members to undertake more independent research, perhaps by utilising data available from the Business Improvement and Modernisation Service (BIMS);
 - scrutiny specific training to be offered to Cabinet members as well as Scrutiny members (including chairing skills, skills in asking the 'right' questions, media and social media training, and 1:1 training sessions if required). Training events in the form of 'dummy meetings' may be useful for some new members following next year's local authority elections as well as having training events laid on in the morning, afternoon and evening;
 - the need for all members to read reports and prepare for meetings;
 - the need for Chairs to prepare for meetings, be strategic and effective in their role as Chair as well as to show leadership when required (refraining from asking too many questions from the Chair);
 - setting a clear set of goals for scrutiny;
 - working together with Cabinet to raise the profile of Scrutiny within the Council's governance arrangements;
 - regular meetings between SCVCG and Cabinet/Lead Members;
 - more and better use of external regulators' reports
 - monitoring the results and outcomes of the scrutiny process to ensure continual improvement and the delivery of the Council's objectives;
 - give individual scrutiny members more responsibility for specific areas, similar to the Service Challenge responsibility (asking them to examine specific matters and report back to their committee);
 - pre-meetings/briefing sessions to be arranged for entire committees ahead of specific scrutiny meetings to ensure that all members understand the subject matter and the issues i.e. ahead of a call-in meeting;
 - more use of Task and Finish (T&F) Groups, expert witnesses and public involvement with T&F Groups;
 - issues raised at Service Challenge meetings should appear on scrutiny agendas; and
 - improving public engagement with residents and communities through closer working between Scrutiny and Town & Community Councils, and by Scrutiny issuing regular press releases/messages on social media.

- 4.7 Having regard to the findings of the scrutiny self-evaluation the Council is asked to determine which areas for improvement scrutiny in Denbighshire should focus on for the remainder of this Council's term of office and in readiness for the new Council in May 2017. Areas suggested by members at the meeting will be considered by the SCVCG for possible incorporation into the Scrutiny Improvement Action Plan (Appendix 1).

5. Scrutiny Proposal Forms

Attached to this report for information purposes are Scrutiny Proposal Forms:

Appendix 3: Member Proposal Form

Appendix 4: Scrutiny Request Form for residents/members of the public
(bilingual version)

A presentation will be given at the meeting to accompany the discussion on this report. Reference will be made during the presentation to the above forms and their use.

6. How does the decision contribute to the Corporate Priorities?

Effective scrutiny will assist the Council to deliver its corporate priorities in line with community needs, residents' wishes and within budget.

7. What will it cost and how will it affect other services?

No additional costs will arise from the inclusion of improvement measures in the action plan. Any costs incurred with respect to the implementation of the actions in the action plan will be met from within the existing budgets

8. What are the main conclusions of the Well-being Impact Assessment? The completed Well-being Impact Assessment report can be downloaded from the [website](#) and should be attached as an appendix to the report

A Well-being Impact Assessment has been undertaken on the benefits of strengthening the Council's scrutiny function. It concluded that a strong and effective scrutiny function will, as an integral part of its work, consider the impact of policies, strategies and service delivery on the Well-being goals and the sustainable development principle.

9. What consultations have been carried out with Scrutiny and others?

The presentation of this report to County Council forms part of the consultation process on continually improving scrutiny in Denbighshire.

10. Chief Finance Officer Statement

The activities outlined in this report will be delivered using existing staff and financial resources.

11. What risks are there and is there anything we can do to reduce them?

Regular revision and monitoring of scrutiny practices and the Scrutiny Improvement Plan mitigates against the risk of adverse regulatory reports.

12. Power to make the Decision

Section 4.11.9 of the Council's Constitution states that County Council may consider reports from the Council's Scrutiny Committees.

Contact Officer:

Scrutiny Co-ordinator

Tel: 01824 712554

e-mail: rhian.evans@denbighshire.gov.uk